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Message Text

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, JA
SUBJECT: CAN KOMEITO WIN IN NORTHERN JAPAN?

1. SUMMARY: DESPITE POSSIBLE NATIONWIDE GAINS FOR KOMEITO IN COMING LOWER HOUSE ELECTION, ITS COMEBACK ATTEMPT IN NORTHERN JAPAN IS BESET BY DIFFICULTIES SUGGESTIVE OF BROADER WEAKNESSES IN PARTY'S STRUCTURE AND APPEAL. KOMEITO'S REBUILDING EFFORT FOLLOWING ITS 1972 ELECTION REVERSES HAS RESTORED ENTHUSIASTIC SOKA GAKKAI BACKING FOR PARTY BUT HAS ALSO DIMINISHED ITS APPEAL AMONG NON-RELIGIOUS VOTERS WHOSE SUPPORT

IS ESSENTIAL IF KOMEITO IS TO ACHIEVE GOAL OF REPLACING COMMUNISTS AS SECOND-RANKING OPPOSITION PARTY. SINCE SOKA GAKKAI VOTE ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT TO ELECT LOCAL KOMEITO CANDIDATES, MOST ARE GOING INTO ELECTION AS UNDERDOGS HOPING TO EKE OUT NARROW VICTORIES OVER STRONGER

OPPONENTS BY EXPLOITING RIVALRIES AMONG CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATES, POSSIBLE DECREASES IN COMMUNIST VOTING STRENGTH, AND LIMITED ASSISTANCE

FROM DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST VOTERS. END SUMMARY.

2. KOMEITO IS RUNNING FIVE CANDIDATES IN NORTHERN JAPAN (HOKKAIDO, AOMORI, AKITA, IWATE AND MIYAGI PREFECTURES) IN ATTEMPT TO REGAIN ITS THREE LOWER HOUSE SEATS LOST IN 1972 ELECTION, AND TO OUST COMMUNISTS FROM POSITION AS SECOND-RANKING OPPOSITION PARTY IN REGION (COMMUNISTS GAINED THREE SEATS FOR CURRENT TOTAL OF FOUR).
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KOMEITO'S 1972 SETBACK STEMMED LARGELY FROM DIMINISHED SOKA GAKKAI

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SUPPORT FOLLOWING FORMAL SEPARATION OF PARTY FROM PARENT RELIGIOUS BODY. RUNNING AS REPRESENTATIVES OF OSTENSIBLY INDEPENDENT POLITICAL MOVEMENT IN 1972, ALL FOUR KOMEITO CANDIDATES--INCLUDING THREE INCUMBENTS--WERE DECISIVELY DEFEATED WHEN VOTERS REACTED SKEPTICALLY TO PARTY'S NEW SECULAR IMAGE AND SOKA GAKKAI MEMBERS MISCONSTRUED CHANGE AS INJUNCTION TO REFRAIN FROM LENDING THEIR CUSTOMARY ALL-OUT SUPPORT TO KOMEITO CANDIDATES. PARTY'S ELECTORAL DEBACLE WAS AGGRAVATED BY LOSS OF KOMEITO CANDIDATES TO COMMUNIST ARCHRIVALS IN THREE OF FOUR DISTRICTS CONTESTED BY BOTH PARTIES.

3. LOCAL KOMEITO OFFICIALS NOW CLAIM TO HAVE LARGELY OVERCOME THEIR EARLIER DIFFICULTIES THROUGH THREE-YEAR PARTY RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT WHICH HAS FOCUSED ON SOLIDIFYING SOKA GAKKAI SUPPORT WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY BROADENING PARTY'S BASE AMONG FARM, LABOR AND BUSINESS GROUPS. AS EVIDENCE OF KOMEITO'S GROWING STRENGTH IN REGION, THEY CITE PARTY'S RECENT GAINS IN UPPER HOUSE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS WHICH SHOW SUBSTANTIAL INCREASES OVER VOTES POLLED BY UNSUCCESSFUL KOMEITO CANDIDATES IN 1972. BUT MOST OBSERVERS HERE ATTRIBUTE THESE GAINS TO PARTY'S SUCCESS IN RECOVERING VIGOROUS SOKA GAKKAI SUPPORT RATHER THAN TO SIGNIFICANT BROADENING OF ITS ELECTORAL APPEAL. MORE OMINOUSLY FOR KOMEITO'S FUTURE, THESE OBSERVERS ALSO DISCERN AS EFFECT OF RESTORATION OF CLOSE KOMEITO-SOKA GAKKAI TIES GROWING DISINCLINATION AMONG NON-RELIGIOUS VOTERS TO SUPPORT PARTY'S CANDIDATES REGARDLESS OF THEIR POSITIONS ON POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC ISSUES.

4. ALTHOUGH KOMEITO CANDIDATES ENTER LOWER HOUSE ELECTION WITH SOLID SOKA GAKKAI SUPPORT, GAKKAI MEMBERSHIP HAS FAILED TO INCREASE AS RAPIDLY AS VOTING POPULATION LEVAING PARTY'S PREDICTED VOTE TOTALS WELL BELOW WIN-LINE IN MOST DISTRICTS. WITH LITTLE PROSPECT OF ATTRACTING UNCOMMITTED OR "FLOATING" VOTES, KOMEITO PURSUING COME-FROM-BEHIND STRATEGY BASED UPON EXPLOITATION OF WEAKNESSES OF STRONGER OPPONENTS. CURRENT PRESS ANALYSES SUGGEST, HOWEVER, THAT ONLY TWO OF FIVE KOMEITO CANDIDATES STAND MUCH CHANCE OF WINIING WITH THIS STRATEGY, AND THEIR SUCCESS WILL DEPEND ON STILL UNPREDICTABLE VOTE-SPLITTING AMONG CONSERVATIVES, DECLINE IN COMMUNIST VOTING STRENGTH AND SUPPORT FROM DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST VOTERS IN DISTRICTS WHERE DSP CANDIDATES NOT RUNNING. KOMEITO, IN SHORT, WILL BE LUCKY TO REGAIN ONE OR TWO SEATS, AND ITS CHANCES FOR REPLACING COMMUNISTS AS SECOND OPPOSITION PARTY IN REGION ARE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

REMOTE.

5. COMMENT: OUTCOME OF ELECTION IN NORTHERN JAPAN WILL HAVE LITTLE IMPACT ON KOMEITO'S OVERALL CHANCES FOR INCREASING ITS LOWER HOUSE STRENGTH (CURRENTLY 30). PARTY HAS LONG BEEN WEAK IN REGION WHICH IS PREDOMINATELY RURAL AND CONSERVATIVE. WE FEEL, HOWEVER, THAT DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY KOMEITO IN STAGING COMEBACK HERE MAY HAVE RELEVANCE FOR OTHER REGIONS. PARTY HAS APPARENTLY NOT

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RESOLVED DILEMMA OF SECULARIZATION BY ESTABLISHING POLITICAL IDENTITY CAPABLE OF ATTRACTING NON-RELIGIOUS VOTERS. HERE AS ELSEWHERE, THIS PROBLEM APPEARS LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO HINDER KOMEITO'S EFFORT TO ECLIPSE APPEAL OF COMMUNIST RIVALS.
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